

Louis Alvarez interviewed by Paul Vance, Setare Arashloo, and Barrie Cline

Paul Vance: Is that on[inaudible 00:00:05]?

Setare Arashloo: Yes.

Paul Vance: Perfect. All right, so I guess we're going to start with the easiest one. Please tell us your name and your job title.

Louis Alvarez: My name is Louis Alvarez, and my job title?

Paul Vance: Yup.

Louis Alvarez: I am currently a shop steward at Roosevelt Island, employed by EJ Electric. I work for [00:00:30] a business agent called Kenny Forsberg, who is a business agent for midtown Manhattan, because Roosevelt Island is considered part of Manhattan. I'm also ...

Paul Vance: Okay, many hats.

Louis Alvarez: ... an officer of Local 3. I've been an officer for about four years now. I first started in the examining board, and now I am currently on the executive board of Local 3. I'll see you on Monday.

Paul Vance: [00:01:00] Okay. Oh, man. The pressure's on. You work for a business agent, can you explain that a little bit?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, okay, I can explain that. Business agents are an extension of the business manager. Business agents are responsible to handle the union relationship [00:01:30] with the owners and the contractors. They overlook their jurisdiction and make sure that all the work is being done according to our bylaws and our constitution. They have people, they can't man their jurisdiction by themselves, so there are stewards who are hired by the business manager and by the business agents, and [00:02:00] they are an extension of the business agent and the business manager.

A steward, what he does, is he represents the men on the job. He protects the jurisdiction of Local 3, and he also protects the contractor's interests, as well.

Paul Vance: Okay. What was your third hat that you wore, the third job that you ...

Louis Alvarez: Not my third, but I'm also an electrician on the job. The [00:02:30] stewards, they work as electricians out in the field. I'm also an officer of Local 3, I'm on the executive board of Local 3.

Paul Vance: Can you explain that a little bit more?

Louis Alvarez: Sure. Well, there's five executive board members in Local 3. We are, according to the bylaws of Local 3 and the constitution of the IBEW, every local has officers. They have a president, [00:03:00] they have a vice-president, they have exam board officers, and they have a treasurer, recording secretary, and of course, executive board. Executive board is basically kind of like the governing body of Local 3. We take actions on all different types of things that may come up that affect the union as a whole, as a whole entity. We represent all 29,000 members of the local.

Paul Vance: [00:03:30] You're doing this on top of ...

Louis Alvarez: Doing this on top of my regular day job.

Paul Vance: ... being an electrician.

Louis Alvarez: Yeah. I have to go to the local, to the union hall several times a month. According to the bylaws, we have to attend at least two executive board meetings a month. We also are involved with participating withdrawal cards, we swear people in, we give people their cards, we reinstate members back into [00:04:00] the local, we handle all types of things that affect the union, yeah.

Paul Vance: Do you live in the city?

Louis Alvarez: I live in Long Island City, Queens. Born and raised.

Paul Vance: You were raised here, okay. What's your background?

Louis Alvarez: As far as what?

Paul Vance: You said you were from, are you from this neighborhood, Long Island City?

Louis Alvarez: I was born and raised on the other end of Long Island City that borders Astoria. [00:04:30] I lived there basically my whole life. Born in '67, my parents were there since 1963. My mom died in the same apartment that she arrived from. My parents immigrated from Colombia, along with my four older brothers. I was born in '67, and I was raised in that apartment until I was old enough, until I went away to college, and then basically I was out of the house from that point on.

Paul Vance: Was anyone in your [00:05:00] family a part of the local, or in construction, or ...

Louis Alvarez: No, no. My father was not a tradesman, he was a printer by trade. My mom was a housewife. None of my older brothers were in construction. Yeah, that's not true, my next oldest brother was a plumber at the time. I could have gone that route, but I had two older relatives who are [00:05:30] still with the union who were young, one was an apprentice and the other one was a mechanic, at the time, and they were heavily, heavily involved with Local 3. When I was 17 years

old, in high school, they were already selling me on the idea to get into Local 3 because I had no idea what it was. The only thing I learned about it was from them. I asked around, and I realized what [00:06:00] a great opportunity it was, because it was a great union, as it is today, with good benefits, and it was a career. I wasn't sure if I was going to do it right after school. I always had it on a back burner. I went to college for two years, and then, after college, I dropped out, and after two years I ...

Paul Vance: What did you study?

Louis Alvarez: Business administration. I went to SUNY Farmingdale, and then I decided that, you know what? I'm not going to do that. I didn't [00:06:30] know what I was going to do. I had taken the fire department test.

Paul Vance: Did you have any other jobs prior to ...

Louis Alvarez: I had a few jobs, yeah. I drove for a while, after college. I decided I was going to quit college one day, I picked up the paper, I picked up the help wanted. I looked in the help wanted ads, and I made a few phone calls, and I went for an interview that same day. That same day, I went for an interview at a sheet metal company.

I could have gone in the direction, too, I could have been a union sheet metal worker, [00:07:00] because I drove, they hired me. I started the next, and I just never went back to school. I could have gone that route, as well, because as I was driving for the sheet metal company, I did that for like eight months, I became friendly with a lot of the guys on the job. They were telling me about their union. Even some of those guys told me, when I told them I had an option to get into Local 3, they were all like, "Do the electricians."

Paul Vance: You said you had a lot [00:07:30] of opportunities to join other local, was it easy, at the time, to ...

Louis Alvarez: Get into the local?

Paul Vance: Because you just hear about all these lines and stuff.

Louis Alvarez: It was, no. Back when I got in, the long lines that you would have to wait for to get your application was no longer. It was the same exact process that we go through today. You had to send in the request for the application, and you had to wait to get the application, and then you had to follow the steps. I got [00:08:00] in the way everybody else gets in today. We had the same quota, 2,000 people on the first day, and then they would just stop it. If you didn't get your application in on the first day, you were done.

Actually, I could have gotten into the local a year earlier, when I started that sheet metal job, around that time. I wanted to get into the local, and I had just missed the deadline by like a week. Yeah, it didn't happen.

Paul Vance: [00:08:30] Working in the sheet metal ...

Louis Alvarez: Company.

Paul Vance: ... company, did any of those skills help, like, migrate over into?

Louis Alvarez: I was only driving, so yeah, I became a much better driver. Back then, we didn't have cell phones. Back then, it was the big, giant brick cell phones, and you had to be like an executive to drive around one of those. We had beepers. [00:09:00] The beepers wouldn't even give you the phone number. The beeper would go off, and you would go to a public phone, and call up the shop, and find out what it was that they wanted. I learned how to drive, and yeah, I learned how to get around, navigate around the city. It was a good experience. I liked it.

Paul Vance: Was that like your first time navigating around the city?

Louis Alvarez: Driving, yes. I grew up in Queens, I would take the subway if I had to go anywhere. I had a car at an early age, but I never [00:09:30] really, there was no need to drive around, like in some parts of Brooklyn or the Bronx. I never had any reason to go to those spots. Everything was basically local or upstate.

Barrie Cline: Can you remember and describe what your first day of work was like?

Louis Alvarez: Oh, I can tell you my very first day of work, oh yeah. I had a road atlas, and they gave me an address of East Broadway. I didn't know that there was a West [00:10:00] Broadway, there was a Broadway, and there was an East Broadway. West Broadway and East Broadway are very short, and I couldn't find this freaking address for the life of me. I kept driving down Broadway, I couldn't find the building.

I called the up. This is my first day, I called up the shop, and he really needed, I forgot what it was that I had for the workers, but they really needed it. It was the end of the workday, they left. Before that happened, I called up the shop, and the guy, the dispatcher [00:10:30] that was working for Aabco Sheet Metal at the time, I can't remember his name, he said, "If you don't get to this job, you're fired. I swear to God, you're fired if you don't find ..."

Now, I never got to the job or anything, and then, all right, so I head back to the job. I'm like, "Ah, fuck, I'm fired. It's my first day at work, and I'm done."

Paul Vance: This is at the sheet metal ...

Louis Alvarez: This is a sheet metal company. When I get to the shop, he was fired. [00:11:00] He got fired. For, all the reasons, that to this day I don't know why, but I know he screwed up something really bad. He was gone. A guy called Tom Brady then became the dispatcher, who happened, we got along so well. Tom Brady was a great guy, and we became very friendly, but I came back, and I thought I was gone, but he was gone.

Paul Vance: Oh, good. You were just like ...

Setare Arashloo: Did you tell him off and say, "In fact, you are gone."

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. It was like, "Wow. [00:11:30] Somebody was looking after me."

Paul Vance: Was it a similar situation on your first day as an electrician?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah.

Paul Vance: Like, the same kind of vibe?

Louis Alvarez: Today's February 24th, right? You guys never put the date down, by the way. Today's February 24th, 2017. Yesterday was my anniversary, and it was 28 years ago that I started my very first day in Local 3 for Forest Datacom. I went to [00:12:00] this building on 388 Greenwich Street. It's this huge office building, right in Tribeca, like a couple of blocks away from Robert De Niro's studio. First time I was ever in Tribeca, too, it was really cool.

I get to the job site, and I get on the Alamac, and I go up to 12th floor or something like that. I get off the elevator, I had my electrician's tools, and I was all excited, because I was going to be an electrician, and I wanted [00:12:30] to work as an electrician, you know, learn electrical stuff. I was really upset because I found out that they're a data company, and they were a data company, and they weren't doing any electrical work. It was all telephone work. I get off the elevator, and I find my sub-foreman, and his name was George [Ca-lal-la[00:12:50]. He used to teach telephone at the union. He used to teach the telephone skills at the union, and he was the meanest [00:13:00] son of a bitch. He was so mean.

I'll never forget, I had an earring in my ear, and he goes, "Who are you?" I'm like, "Louie Alvarez, I'm here, I'm a TA1." He was like, "Take that earring out of your ear!" I had to take my earring out, I was shaking. I was like, "All right, what do I do?" He was like, "Grab that broom, go in that office, and sweep it out." I'm like, "Ah, fuck."

Paul Vance: Did he give you a reason why?

Louis Alvarez: Because he was just a dick.

Paul Vance: Ah, really?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah.

Paul Vance: Just so he could get that [crosstalk 00:13:30]?

Louis Alvarez: He used to [00:13:30] treat apprentices really, really bad. We became friends. I realized after a while he wasn't a bad guy. It was a love-hate relationship because sometimes he'd come down really, really hard on me, and then sometimes he was just really sweet and would take care of me.

Paul Vance: How old were you at the time?

Louis Alvarez: 22.

Paul Vance: Oh, wow, so [crosstalk 00:13:51].

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, 22, yeah.

Paul Vance: You said there was like a difference, in your mind, between the telephone [00:14:00] and the electrical side of it, and you were disappointed, kind of. Why ...

Louis Alvarez: I was so disappointed. For nine months I was bitching, and moaning, and complaining. Look, I learned a lot of stuff.

Paul Vance: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Louis Alvarez: As a matter of fact, I learned to color code, which was great, and I learned how to punch down a telephone cable, which is, you know, it's not easy. When you learn the color code, then you'll know what to do, and you'll know how to take a 900 par-a-cab-le[00:14:25] apart and fan it all out, and you'll learn to put that onto [00:14:30] phone blocks. To this day, the color code is still used in phone. They've changed the designs a lot, and I don't do it anymore, but the color cod's the same.

For a long time, I was bitching, and moaning, and complaining. At the time, the apprentice director's name was Buddy Jackson. We would have our monthly apprentice union meetings. For a whole bunch of times, I got up right after the meeting, and I [00:15:00] would approach him, and I would complain to him and tell him that I wanted to get transferred, that I wanted to be an electrician. I didn't want to do data.

The whole year wasn't even over with time to get rotated. There's about nine or ten months. We were in the winter, it was winter time, and I finally got in rotation, so I get rotated. I'm really excited. I get my job ticket. The guys on the job, the crew that I worked with, they threw a little party for me. They took a

collection, [00:15:30] they gave me a card with money and everything, and they got me drunk, and all this good stuff. The next day I go to the job, it's directly across the street.

At the time, in Battery Park, the only area that was built up was up to where the four main office buildings are, where the atrium is and everything. One of them is the American Express building. From that point north, it was all empty lots. It was just one big, [00:16:00] empty lot, except for Stuyvesant High School. It was a deck job. Guess where I got sent?

Paul Vance: Right across the street, [crosstalk 00:16:09] ...

Louis Alvarez: Right in the middle of the winter.

Paul Vance: ... day. [crosstalk 00:16:12].

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. It was for a company called Commerce Electric, and we were doing a lot of the work in the street right outside of the building. It was cold, and it sucked, and yeah.

Paul Vance: Can you describe your current [00:16:30] job site?

Louis Alvarez: Current job site where I work now?

Paul Vance: Yeah, yeah.

Louis Alvarez: I'm working on Roosevelt Island at the Cornell New York Tech Project. There's a total of four buildings that just went up. I'm employed by EJ Electric, we had a couple of contracts there. There's a total, between all the contractors that are there, there's about 150 electricians.

Paul Vance: Oh, wow.

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, and it's a great site.

Paul Vance: It's 150 electricians, but [00:17:00] all separated different shops?

Louis Alvarez: Separated different companies, yeah.

Paul Vance: Yeah, so each ...

Louis Alvarez: The one company's got like 50, another one's got like 30, another one's got 20, yeah.

Paul Vance: Is there something about your job site that you're at now that you enjoy?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, I love it architecturally, it's beautiful, the buildings are gorgeous. Yeah. It's this big, eco-friendly, [00:17:30] high energy-efficient project, as well. They've got thermal heat, and they've got solar panels going up. The buildings are put up energy efficient. It's pretty neat. Architecturally, it's nice. It's close to home, that's another thing. I got to see the project come right out of the ground when it was just a hole in the ground, not one piece of steel was up or anything. I got to see a project from when it was just a hole in the ground to, I'm going to be there, I think until [00:18:00] the very last piece of molding is put in.

Paul Vance: Wow, that's a lot. What type of work do you find yourself doing at this particular job site, now?

Louis Alvarez: What type of work?

Paul Vance: Like, are you doing anything specifically there? You, specifically.

Louis Alvarez: The contractor that I'm working with, we're doing what we call [Core and shell 00:18:23] shell. The Core and shell of the building is the structure of the building [00:18:30] before any customers go in and do a build-out. It's the whole outside of a building, and the core of the building, there's like where the elevators are and everything, and then the electrical service into the building, and the fire alarm system we're doing, as well, and all of the lighting that's not in any customer's space. We're doing all of that work.

Paul Vance: Wow.

Louis Alvarez: It's a lot of conduit work, a lot of wires, and putting up fixtures.

Paul Vance: Are [00:19:00] you specifically doing more conduit work, or are you doing ...

Louis Alvarez: All conduit work, yeah.

Paul Vance: You are?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah.

Paul Vance: Can you explain how you learned the skills that you had as an electrician? You started out as doing data, but did you have any prior knowledge in [crosstalk 00:19:26]?

Louis Alvarez: No, no. I had as little knowledge as most of our apprentices [00:19:30] have when they get in the business is, a lot of the apprentices come in not even knowing how to swing a hammer. I already had a little bit of construction skills under my belt when I got in, it's not like I hadn't been ... Never on a big project like that, because I was ... My brother, I helped my brother in the summer, one summer, as a plumber. We used to go to houses and stuff, and the company that I worked for, and things around the house, as well.

My older brother was [00:20:00] always very mechanically inclined when it came to construction, and tools, and stuff. I kind of led by his ...

Paul Vance: Shadowed him?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah, because I found that I had the skill for that, as well. I think it runs in the family, because my younger brother never had any electrical skills, and he's a heck of a great mechanic. Funny story, you guys, we were just here at my apartment, and I was showing you artwork that my oldest brother did.

Paul Vance: [00:20:30] Was he the plumber?

Louis Alvarez: No, the oldest brother was an artist. But, I'll never forget this. When I separated with my wife, he was living on Java Street at the time in Greenpoint, so I moved in with him. He had this big, big studio. We took a little section, and we put up studs, and we put up these partition walls. A couple of friends of mine came over to help me, and they had way too many beers, so they weren't really working that well, and my brother, [00:21:00] out of frustration, he just, he took the screw gun, and he and I were working together, and that was the first time he and I ever worked with tools together because I never really saw him working with tools. I could tell you that he picked up that screw gun, and it was probably the first time he ever used it, and it was like he was a pro. Just, zip, zip, zip, zip.

Some people just don't have it in them. They can't get a screw in the wall. He's banging them out like nothing. I think maybe that just kind of runs in the family, [crosstalk 00:21:30].

Paul Vance: Do you think [00:21:30] that?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah, I think that.

Paul Vance: I mean, like ...

Louis Alvarez: I believe that, sure.

Paul Vance: How long have you been working in electric?

Louis Alvarez: I think some people are born with some type of intelligence or whatever, and I think in my family, because my brothers, not to brag, but we're all pretty decent mechanics. One of my brothers does plumbing as well as, he's in electric work, does plumbing on the side. Like I said, my younger brother never had any construction skills, and he just got in the trade, and he's a good mechanic.

Paul Vance: Do you think you learned more from [00:22:00] being on a job site, or did they have like, class work and stuff like they do now?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah. Well, no, it wasn't as good as you guys, they have it now, that amazing training center. We didn't have hands-on training when I was an apprentice. The only thing that was hands-on was the motor control work that we did. Everything else you learned was on the job. I always picked up on stuff. I never really had a hard time.

Paul Vance: Were you ever [00:22:30] scared of working in a particular location, or with a tool, or something like that?

Louis Alvarez: Never.

Paul Vance: Never?

Louis Alvarez: Never ever did I feel any fear to do anything that anybody gave me to do. Not even afraid of failing. Somehow, I always went, and to this day, I go in not knowing that I don't know. That's okay. Obviously, you're going to be put in a situation, you're going to be put in with somebody who knows. You're going to learn [00:23:00] from that person. To this day, I'm not afraid of starting anything new, of starting any task, and I just pay attention, and I learn what I got to learn.

Paul Vance: You're still learning.

Louis Alvarez: There's always new stuff to learn. I did fiber-optic for like 2.5 years, and I'd never touched that stuff before, but I was hooked up with these great mechanics, and they were good teachers. If you had a good relationship and you get along with the person who you're with, whether you are an apprentice and he's a mechanic, or you're a mechanic and he's got more skill in there. If you get along [00:23:30] with the person and you guys hit it off well, there's no reason why he's not going to want to share that information and that knowledge with you, because that's just human nature.

Paul Vance: Can you tell me about some of your co-workers now? Do you have a particular partner that you're working with?

Louis Alvarez: No, right now I'm mostly solo. I'm also, I cannot be put on a task where it's very time-consuming.

Paul Vance: As a steward?

Louis Alvarez: As a steward, because at any moment I could get a phone call from one of the [00:24:00] other job sites where I have to run out and take care of something. I get a phone call from the business agent, I have to take care of something. At any moment, I could be pulled off of that project. When I'm given something to do, it's something that, they'll put somebody with me where he could just continue with the job if I have to leave.

Paul Vance: Can you walk me through like a typical day for you? Since you are a steward, it seems to differ a little bit from what a [00:24:30] regular mechanic would like ...

Louis Alvarez: Yeah. A typical day is, I go to work. We do our stretching in the morning.

Paul Vance: Do you? Do you [crosstalk 00:24:37]?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, we do, yeah, yeah. EJ Electric has a policy where on their time, on company time, right before the day starts, or right when the day starts at seven o'clock in the morning, we all muster up right outside the shanty ...

Paul Vance: That's not through the contractor?

Louis Alvarez: Huh?

Paul Vance: I worked on a job where it was the contractor ...

Louis Alvarez: It's not through the GC, no. We're working for Turner right now, and they don't do it on my site. EJ [00:25:00] has a new policy.

Paul Vance: Oh, really?

Louis Alvarez: Now, I don't know if they do it on all the other job sites, but they do it on mine, and it's totally cool, because I think it's great.

Setare Arashloo: What kind of stretches?

Paul Vance: [crosstalk 00:25:12]

Louis Alvarez: We have a whole routine, which is great. We stretch our legs, our lower back. We stretch our arms, our shoulders, our wrists, our neck, do a stretch, neck, you know. We have a great routine that we follow, same exact routine every single day. It's pretty cool. It's about 15 minutes [00:25:30] long, and the contractor's paying for this. It's on his time, it's not on our personal time.

We do that, we stretch out and everything, and then whatever it is that I could be of assistance to somebody else, I'll tag up with that person. Like I said, I'm not beholden to complete that task. I may have to ...

Paul Vance: If you have a call.

Louis Alvarez: For whatever reason, I may have to leave, yeah.

Paul Vance: Then, do you work on another job site for a little bit?

Louis Alvarez: No, no, just that one in particular. [00:26:00] I can only work for EJ, so I can't work for another contractor physically.

Paul Vance: Oh, so you're going on calls for other ...

Louis Alvarez: If the foreman on the other job site has something, an issue that may have come up that day, he'll call me, and then I'll walk over, and then we'll talk about it. If we have to talk to a worker, then we talk to a worker. If a worker calls me and he's got an issue, I'll come over and talk with him. Sometimes it's safety issues, or whatever it may be.

Barrie Cline: What [00:26:30] is it mostly?

Louis Alvarez: A lot of it is safety, a lot of it is safety, but we're not safety officers, so you have to know how to try and handle that. Because safety policy is, the responsibility falls on the contractor, not on the local. Although we train people on safety, and we pay for workers, our members, to do an OSHA 10 class, or [00:27:00] for supervision to do an OSHA 30 class, we'll train them. Their safety responsibility on the job site is the responsibility of the contractor. We just try to address it and bring it to their attention so they can fix the problem.

Or, there could be a jurisdictional issue where another contractor or another trade is trying to do our work because they think that they can get away with it. Or, [00:27:30] the general contractor that you're working with is trying to hire a non-union contractor to do a portion of the work, and we have to step in, especially if it's a PLA job, because usually PLA contract states that all of the work has to be done by the signatory union that sign off to that PLA.

Barrie Cline: Sorry, would you mind, because not everyone who listens to this would understand, like a short definition of a PLA?

Louis Alvarez: PLA is a project labor agreement. It's usually an agreement [00:28:00] between the building trades and whichever customer that you're working for. Customer could be a customer of one particular project that's going up, or it could be a huge project, like, say, the Hudson Yards project, or it could be Brookfields. Brookfields owns a lot of property throughout Manhattan, it could be a PLA agreement with Brookfield, or it could be the school construction authority. Every single contract is a different PLA. A lot of the language [00:28:30] is cookie cutter from one to the other, but every individual project, they may tweak it a certain way, one way of the other. Usually, they're kind of cookie cutter, though.

The project labor agreement, what it is, it's that the building trades, in order to ensure that that project is going to be, that the manpower are going to be by the building trades unions. Building trades are, [00:29:00] it's like an organization of all the different labor unions throughout the city that belong to the building trades. The PLA goes out to all the individual local unions, and if their business manager or whoever their principal officer is, whether it be their president or their business manager, agrees to the terms of the PLA, he will then sign on to that PLA. Every local union has to agree to that PLA if they want their workers to follow [00:29:30] those rules.

Now, you have this agreement, which all of the rules that are in PLA may not follow all of the rules of those individual local unions. There may be some discrepancies, or there may be some concessions that are made, but these are all things that are negotiated so we're sure to be on that job. For instance, Local 3 on a PLA, we're the signatory union to do the electrical [00:30:00] work there. If we're the only union signed onto that PLA that does electrical work, that means that all of the electricians that are on that job, for whatever contractor it may be, has to be from Local 3, or Local 1 with the plumbers, or local 638 with the steam-fitters, and so on.

That's basically in a nutshell what a PLA is, which is great, because there's specific rules that people have to follow. I was able to [00:30:30] address certain issues on the job. They tried to hire a company that was going to put in these motor controls for the windows, and the motor controls were low voltage. These guys were non-electricians, they were installers of these motors, and they were going to try and install the cable. We were like, "No, no, by New York City electrical code, that's the job of an electrician." I don't care who you hire, along as it's a signatory contractor that's on [00:31:00] this PLA, because you guys agreed to the PLA, so you can only have Local 3...

Paul Vance: Were the window guys from New York?

Louis Alvarez: The window guys were like, they were like this non-union shop. They weren't even installing the windows, they were just installing these little motors, which they couldn't even do that.

Paul Vance: Mm-hmm (affirmative), I see.

Louis Alvarez: They couldn't even be on a project because they were non-union.

Paul Vance: Is there a certain demographic that makes up your job site right now? Is it mostly A, is it MIJ, or ...

Louis Alvarez: It's mostly A, and apprentices, [00:31:30] and mechanics. The mechanics that get A rate, yeah.

Setare Arashloo: I have ...

Louis Alvarez: Except one of the projects that are on my project, it's a PLA, an 80-20 PLA. 80-20 is like, they get 80% of the full rate, but within that, it's a residential project. Within that project, we have workers from the new division that we just [00:32:00] formed to tackle the residential problem that we're having, that we're losing a lot of work to non-union. We have a new division with these workers, called RWs or RE electricians.

Paul Vance: You have different PLAs on the same site?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. Several, several. Yup, every single project there's four contractors on, and with every contractor there's a separate PLA.

Paul Vance: Is there a type of work that you find [00:32:30] yourself to excel at? Since you started off doing data work, do you ...

Louis Alvarez: Electrical work I excel at. Basically, fit-out work, which is like basic circuitry and stuff I excel at, but I have dabbled in a lot of different things. Throughout my career, they'll say I'm kind of like a jack-of-all. There's things that I've never touched.

Paul Vance: Still.

Louis Alvarez: I've worked on large conduit, like four-inch conduit, [00:33:00] but I would never tell anybody that I am proficient at doing concentric bends large conduit. When it comes to smaller conduit, I can bend it pretty well. I did fiber-optic for a couple of years. I also held a license for a few years, as well. I'm a New York City master electrician. I had to give up my license. I gave up my license a few years ago when I became an officer of Local 3, especially on the executive board, because then there's [00:33:30] a conflict of interest, but I held a license for a company called Allan Briteway. I would attend a lot of inspections and stuff like that, and I worked as a project manager in their office for five years, which was a great experience, too, because I got to see our business from a different perspective, as a person in the office, as a project manager as opposed to being a foreman out in the field. Also worked as a foreman, as well.

Paul Vance: Being a jack-of-all-trades type, [00:34:00] is there any specific skills that you find necessary to have to complete your jobs and stuff throughout the day?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, you got to be well-organized. You have to be well-organized, and you got to know your task for the day, and you have to try to complete what you started out to complete. I always like to tell people, start with the hardest thing in the morning. Yeah, [00:34:30] there's one thing that I think that a lot of electricians should know, and that's more code, New York City code. Because I held a license, I also got involved with the code classes that we have at the local. We teach our members how to be more informed on the New York City electrical code. I was one of the crew that helped develop that class. I'm still involved with it in a certain way.

I'm, not very well-versed, [00:35:00] but I'm probably a little bit better-versed in the code than a lot of the guys out there. It's important to know the code because it tells you how to install things the right way and according to the law, because New York City electrical code is the law. The analogy I like to use is like this. You can be a real good car-driver, you know? A real great car-driver, [00:35:30] be an excellent, and you have great instincts, you know how to avoid accidents, you know to think what people are doing beforehand. You could do figure eights, you could drive fast, you could weave in and out of traffic. If you

don't know the traffic laws, if you don't know the traffic laws, you don't know the speed limits, you don't know that you can't do certain things because they're illegal, you're dangerous.

That's kind of like the same thing with the code. If you don't know how to install something [00:36:00] by code, you could possibly be doing an illegal act that needs to be repaired or corrected at some point. That's a loss of money, and that's an embarrassment to the local, because we're supposed to be well-trained electricians, and it's an embarrassment for the company that you work for.

Paul Vance: Where does the code come from? Kind of like, where do these laws get started? Is it [00:36:30] from trial and error, or is it like ...

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, trial and error. It's a lot of science behind it, too, as well, because electricity, it's physics. It's basically to protect equipment and people, to prevent fires. That's there's an electrical code. Nation electrical code, and then every jurisdiction has their own version of the code, as well, as we do in New York City. It's to prevent fires, to prevent accidents, prevent people from getting electrocuted, [00:37:00] places burning down, equipment blowing up, and things falling on your head.

It was something that evolved since like the 1900s. It's been evolving ever since. We had, we call it the Ed Koch book. That was a code that existed for a while, and not until 2001, right after 9/11, did things start changing big-time in New York [00:37:30] City and throughout the nation. We revamped our code, and we took the national standard, and in New York City, we add our amendments, because there's some things that we're a little more stringent on than the national electrical code. We've revised it every so many years. It hasn't been revised since 2011, which is the current.

Paul Vance: How often do they revise it?

Louis Alvarez: It's supposed to be every three years, but it hasn't been revised since 2011 right now. It [00:38:00] takes a while to revise.

Setare Arashloo: Has your job ever felt creative to you?

Louis Alvarez: Has it ever felt creative? Yeah, sure. A lot of times you run into situation that you have to figure out a problem. It could be anything. It could be an obstruction in the way, something that was not foreseen on a drawing, and you've got to work around it. You have to be creative and be a problem solver. Of course, yeah.

Now, [00:38:30] if you're thinking of more like an artistic way, there are things on a job that we do and that we take a lot of pride in, like say, for instance, when guys are tying in a circuit panel, a breaker panel, and you have all these

wires that just came into it. A lot of men take a lot of pride in shaping all of those wires in there very nice, and neat, and very professional, with sharp angles, and make it look neat, and take a lot of pride in that. It takes a little more time, but when a customer walks around and he sees that [00:39:00] quality work, there's a saying that quality remains long after the price is forgotten, because he knows he's paying for some quality work. When you see beautiful conduit work, as well, it takes a lot of skill to do that, but aesthetically, it's beautiful, and you know you're getting quality stuff. Yeah.

Setare Arashloo: Do you have a favorite tool?

Louis Alvarez: A favorite tool?

Setare Arashloo: Yeah.

Louis Alvarez: My pliers.

Setare Arashloo: Cool. Have you ever customized them, or do you have any specific ...

Louis Alvarez: Pliers [00:39:30] and the screwdriver. That's an electrician's two main tools.

Paul Vance: What kind of screwdriver?

Louis Alvarez: I like to use a multi-head, because I could swap it around with the Phillips or the different sizes, yeah.

Setare Arashloo: Have you ever passed down a tool or have any tool passed down to you?

Louis Alvarez: Yes, an electrical tester. When I got into the local in 1989, I had a cousin who was doing construction, non-union, but he moved to Colombia, and he gave me an electrical tester. [00:40:00] To this day, I still have the same tester.

Setare Arashloo: No way.

Louis Alvarez: I was thinking about giving it to my nephew that just got in last month, but his brother's going to get in in September, so I didn't want to give him one and then not the other. I think I'll probably have to hold onto that. Yeah, I still have it to this day.

Paul Vance: That's great.

Louis Alvarez: Yeah.

Barrie Cline: What has it meant to be a union member to you?

Louis Alvarez: To be a union member? It's like a part of a big [00:40:30] family. To be a union member, you belong to an organization that's protecting your best interests. It's

amazing. I think everybody should be unionized in whatever they do. It's a shame that union membership throughout the country has been dropping, especially since Reagan was president. It means a lot to me, because it's my life. I could have gone out and maybe started my own business, [00:41:00] and gone out on my own and stuff, but (Lou's phone rings)... Sorry.

I love the brotherhood, and I love the camaraderie. I say brotherhood, we have sisters too, but brotherhood, the sisterhood. I love the camaraderie between my fellow union members. It's just great to feel that. It's like you're part of this big family, that everybody's out to help you, for the most part. [00:41:30] We all have a common goal, and it's the betterment of the worker. I like it so much. I've been involved for a while.

Paul Vance: Do you have a tradition that you ...

Louis Alvarez: Huh?

Paul Vance: Do you have a tradition that you enjoy about ... ?

Louis Alvarez: A tradition?

Paul Vance: Like a Local 3 tradition, or something like that?

Louis Alvarez: Well, I don't know, let's see.

Paul Vance: Like coffee, union meetings ...

Louis Alvarez: Oh, I got you.

Paul Vance: [crosstalk 00:41:59]

Barrie Cline: [crosstalk 00:41:59]

Louis Alvarez: [00:42:00] Ritual, like a ritual?

Paul Vance: Is there an event or something that you ...

Louis Alvarez: I have, I belong to a few clubs. There's one of the clubs that I actually came up through, and it's the Hispanic club, which is called the Santiago Iglesias Educational Society. It's one of the clubs that I belong to, which I think clubs are very important for the Local. It's where I learned to become more active in my community, and to give back to the Local. I learned, [00:42:30] it's like a fraternal organization, but there's sisters in it too, so that may be the wrong word.

I love going to my club meetings. You mentioned coffee break, coffee break is awesome in the morning. It's a great ritual, because it's just a nice little break in

the morning. It's cool to sit with the guys that you're working with that day, and you just shoot the shit and learn about each other's lives and stuff.

Paul Vance: Do you have like a coffee break story that you tell [00:43:00] to your friends or something?

Louis Alvarez: No, I don't know, man. Anybody just talks about anything, you know, whatever comes to mind. Sometimes when you're having a problem, like say with your house, or construction, or you're doing a repair, you're going to add a deck or whatever it is. Sometimes you just throw that question out there, somebody may have had the same experience, and so you learn from everybody else, and then you learn what hobbies other people are into.

We've got guys that are great musicians, we've got guys that are artists, they can paint. [00:43:30] You get guys, we have this one guy that loves board games. One of my coworkers loves board games. Not electric games, but board games, he just, he goes. He's a fanatic, he loves ... He actually started a group where they meet at a bar like once a week and they play board games. You meet people that have all these different facets ...

Paul Vance: Do you have hobbies?

Louis Alvarez: Huh?

Paul Vance: Do you have hobbies?

Louis Alvarez: My hobby is just, right now, at the moment, I think it's welding.

Paul Vance: Oh, really?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, but I switch around. I have a new hobby like every six months. [00:44:00] Right now it's welding, and I'm actually taking a welding class. I've already made a couple of pieces, before I got into the welding class I made a couple of projects.

Paul Vance: With the union, or is it ...

Louis Alvarez: No, it's just on my own. Oh, the class I'm taking is with the union right now.

Paul Vance: Oh, really?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Paul Vance: Oh, nice.

Louis Alvarez: It's a skill that we offer.

Setare Arashloo: If you want to give advice to a young apprentice or someone who just has started as an electrician, what would that be?

Louis Alvarez: Like I said before, don't be afraid [00:44:30] of doing anything. You need to be cautious, you know, electricity could kill you. You got to be cautious, and you've got to be concerned about your safety, but don't be afraid of tackling any project or try to solve any problem. Because once you show fear, that in itself is going to defeat you, right there. You're going to fail.

Fear and having respect for something is two different [00:45:00] things. Just going, and try to learn as much as you can. Especially today with YouTube, you can learn so much on YouTube. Just try and be as good as you can, whatever project that you're working on. Try to be a well-rounded electrician by learning all different tasks on the job site that you're doing. Don't get stuck doing the same thing all the time. Hope that when you get rotated after every year you go to a shop that's doing some kind of different type of work, [00:45:30] and just learn as much as you can, yeah.

Paul Vance: Was there ever a point where your job felt particularly meaningful? Was there ever a job site that you finished, or a task that you did, that you did ...

Louis Alvarez: Like, real meaningful?

Paul Vance: I mean, or like, maybe something every day, you're like, "I love my job because I get to do this every day."

Louis Alvarez: I remember once I worked for two [00:46:00] weeks on the Williamsburg Bridge on a necklace sliding on the cables. I was in heaven for two weeks.

Paul Vance: Yeah?

Louis Alvarez: If you do something like that, you get paid high time, you get safety pay, extra pay. You get time and a half. I used to say to myself, "I would do this for straight time."

Paul Vance: Why is that? What is it that [crosstalk 00:46:22] ...

Louis Alvarez: Because I had the adventure of climbing up those cables on the bridge and actually standing on the very tippy-top of the tower [00:46:30] of the Williamsburg Bridge, all the way at the very, very top, standing there. It's a lot bigger than you think. It's not like a little thing or you're going to fall off, it's a lot bigger. Walking up and down those cables, and repairing the lights and everything, cool stuff. Very cool.

Paul Vance: That's a view not many people get to have ever in their lives.

Barrie Cline: Yeah.

Louis Alvarez: Something that was very meaningful though, when I was working, I'll tell you this to add to that question. [00:47:00] After 9/11, I was doing fiber-optics at the time, that's when I was doing the fiber work. I was working with [U-O-Cane 00:47:08], and we had the Verizon account, and we did a lot of work down by ground zero. Yeah, and we get paid good money, but you also felt like you were part of the whole cleanup, and you were helping the city.

Paul Vance: You were helping.

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, sure. Not only that, but some of us, we'd also volunteer [00:47:30] and help at the dig-out. Yeah, sure, I was on the pile a few times. I volunteered to be on the pile with firefighters, and cops, and other construction workers, on my own time, and then go, and help, and remove debris. I was up on top of the pile with firefighters that were actually digging with their hands, with little shovels, and hand-digging debris, and I was part of that whole big bucket line, the line. Then, we would pass debris. Then, [00:48:00] the whistle would blow every now and then because they would think that they found somebody, like a body part or something, and everything would go silent. I never actually got to see a body getting pulled out, but then we'd resume our dig. It's pretty meaningful.

Paul Vance: Did you have access to that because you were an electrician?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, because I was doing fiber work. What happened is that a lot of the fiber was going into Tower One, I think it was. There was like these main hubs there. [00:48:30] When anybody usually gets a fiber-optic run, they run two lines, they run a redundant line, because like what happened at 9/11, a lot of the lines are severed, but they had another, they had a redundant line that came in from another direction. Some people lost service, but a lot of people did not lose service because of that backup.

Now, you have these companies that really depend on these fiber networks that lost [00:49:00] their main. Now we had to rush and replace a lot of this fiber, and repair a lot of the manholes down there. We were working in manholes right at 9/11, right there.

Barrie Cline: Can you say a little more about an electrician's role at that time? I remember hearing something about that, that electricians had been coming in, early on. Not along with first responders, but early on.

Louis Alvarez: [00:49:30] Local 3 lost 17 brothers, we lost 17 brothers in the two towers. I almost lost one of my cousins. He was a steward in one of the buildings at the time, but he happened to be in the basement, I believe, when the planes hit. He could have very easily been doing work at one of the top floors, and we would have lost him. We were going crazy. We thought he was dead until he finally was able to communicate. We lost four brothers from the IBW from Local 12-12, who were in the television division.

[00:50:00] Yeah, so it was traumatic for us, as well. A lot of firefighters died, and a lot of other people died, as well, but we lost our few, also. Local 3 played a big role in helping with the emergency lights and with the power that needed to come back up. Construction workers don't get enough credit for the work that were there. The first responders were the first responders. They were doing their job. Their job was to be first [00:50:30] responders. They were brave. They were doing their job. We also lost people, as well, and we were also a very important part of rebuilding of getting all of that shit out of there, fixing what needed to be fixed, at the time, temporarily, and rebuilding new.

Paul Vance: Have you ever been given a compliment on something that you've done?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I don't remember anything, but ...

Paul Vance: I mean like, [00:51:00] by like ... Okay. Do you ever take work home with you, or is it something that ...

Louis Alvarez: When I was project manager, I would bring work home with me, yeah. This table right here would sometimes be full of blueprints. Yeah, so yeah. Yeah.

Paul Vance: Do you think the work that you [00:51:30] do now as an electrician is going to be something that is going to stay in sync, or is it going to change? Do you find the work that you're doing changing?

Louis Alvarez: Well, it's always changing. It's always evolving, the electrical technology. 10 years ago we didn't have as many LEDs as we do now. Everything has LED lights now, electronic ballast, like everything is [00:52:00] computer chips and less relays. Everything's computer-based and electronic-based. The technology just keeps changing.

Paul Vance: Is there anything in particular that you see that ...

Louis Alvarez: There's stuff that I look at now I'm like, "I don't know what to do, I don't know how to install this. I don't know what to do with this," because I'd never seen it before. There's always, even the tools that we use are constantly changing, as well. That bender that you were using today, [00:52:30] like that, when I was coming up in ... That style of bender is only maybe about 10 years old, it's not that old.

Paul Vance: What's the bender that you're using?

Louis Alvarez: A side-winder, yeah. Yeah.

Paul Vance: Was it one that has like the ...

Setare Arashloo: I was just taking picture ...

Paul Vance: Does it have the calculations and stuff on it and all that?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah, it has the protractor on it and everything.

Paul Vance: You can program it and stuff?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, it's a nice machine. Stops the bends automatically and everything. It's a nice machine to use.

Setare Arashloo: If there was anything you could change about your [00:53:00] job, what would that be?

Louis Alvarez: Anything I could change about my job? All right, that's a very broad question, but I'll answer it with this. Yeah, if the labor laws could change more in our favor, and if we had more laws protect the union work in the city, that would be pretty awesome.

Setare Arashloo: That would be on top [00:53:30] of the list?

Paul Vance: [crosstalk 00:53:30]? Yeah.

Louis Alvarez: Hm?

Setare Arashloo: What would be on top of the list for [crosstalk 00:53:34]?

Louis Alvarez: Well, right now I'm scared to death of losing Davis Bacon and Right to Work coming into effect nationwide. That would be detrimental to unions.

Barrie Cline: Could you explain for [crosstalk 00:53:48]?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, it would do a lot of damage to unions. I'm afraid of that happening. I hope that doesn't happen.

Setare Arashloo: What is that, exactly? Can you ...

Louis Alvarez: Right to Work law [00:54:00] is basically this. We call it Right to Work for Less, but Right to Work is this. If there was a Right to Work law in New York state, which there isn't. If there was, and you were being represented by a union, and you didn't feel like being a member of that union and pay dues into that union, you don't have to, but that union is collectively bargaining on your behalf [00:54:30] still. You are benefiting and getting the same benefits as the brother that's next to you. At that moment, you're not a brother any more. You're a scab. You're benefiting from the person that's paying union dues, because their organization is representing you as well as the dues-paying members.

What happens is that now a lot of people, for whatever reasons, because they just won't feel like paying dues, or because they can't, financially, they're

strapped, and maybe that's one of the things that they don't have [00:55:00] to pay for, well, what happens? Less money goes to the union. The union, they're not effectively funded, and they can't effectively do their job to represent all the members. They'll have less staff, and it's harder. That's a way of killing unions.

The Davis Bacon act is a law that was passed during the ... Help me out here, please? The, FDR's time. The New Deal.

Barrie Cline: New Deal, yeah.

Louis Alvarez: [00:55:30] The New Deal, and it was a law that it basically states that all government contracts that go out have to pay the prevailing rate of the area. With New York City, Local 3 sets the prevailing rate for electrical work. We are the better rate, and we have the best benefits. Any government contracts that go out, a non-union guy could bid on that job, but if a non-union guy gets that job, he has to pay his workers the prevailing [00:56:00] rate of the union, because we set the prevailing rate, because we're the highest rate. They have to pay their workers our benefits and our rates, our wages. That keeps the standard up high.

If you didn't have Davis Bacon, which means now any contractor that bids on a government contract could go in and put a low-balled price in. He could put in a very low price, and pay their workers a shit rate. No benefits, [00:56:30] if they wanted to, and that's another way of killing unions, because it evens the playing field, and I'm afraid of losing that.

Paul Vance: Do you feel like you're compensated enough as a ...

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. I feel, I think we have great wages and great benefits. I have no complaints with it. The fact that we're even getting a raise in this new contract is great.

Paul Vance: Awesome.

Louis Alvarez: I'm very proud of the money we make. We don't make the money that a banker makes, [00:57:00] or a guy working in finance on Wall Street, but we make a decent living where you could afford a nice house, you could afford a nice car, you could afford to feed your family and live in a decent area, a decent house. It's a very respectable living.

Paul Vance: Have you ever been injured on the job?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, I've had minor injuries. I've [inaudible 00:57:19] my wrist, I pulled my back out a few times, but nothing earth-shattering where I had to miss a lot of time.

Paul Vance: Is there [00:57:30] anything that inspires you?

Louis Alvarez: To what?

Paul Vance: I mean, to do the work that you do, to wake up in the morning, to [crosstalk 00:57:40] ...

Louis Alvarez: Listen, like any job, sometimes it sucks getting up in the morning.

Paul Vance: I mean, like, but ...

Louis Alvarez: Sometimes you get inspired by the other guys. If you're working on a project that you're excited about, you want to see it to its completion, all the guys that are into it as well, they could inspire you to do a good job. If you're working for a good [00:58:00] foreman ... Sometimes you work with guys that just are such great mechanics, and they inspire you to better yourself. You want to be as good or better than them.

Paul Vance: Have you ever worked on another Williamsburg Bridge type of spot?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. I worked on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Paul Vance: Oh yeah, another bridge?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. I've worked on the Brooklyn Bridge, as well, in 1991. I was an apprentice at the time, but I got my MIJ [00:58:30] card on that time. I wasn't allowed to do any high time, but I did work a lot on the bridge. I also worked on the Henry Hudson Bridge, underneath the bridge, as well. That was pretty cool. I got high-time for that, and that was a fun ... And, on the George Washington Bridge. I did all the controls for the sprinkler lines on the George Washington bridge, yeah. A little bit on the [Throgsneck 00:58:53], but that was just a few times.

Paul Vance: Is there a reason they keep on sending you to all these bridges?

Louis Alvarez: Yeah, yeah. That was a company called [Climber 00:58:59] of Electric, [00:59:00] and they're still around, and they would get, and they still do, they get a lot of public work. They get a lot of public projects, and they do stuff like that, like bridges, they do subway work. Yeah, it was cool. It's cool work. A lot of it was working with rigid.

Paul Vance: Oh, yeah?

Louis Alvarez: I got to work with rigid a lot, and some guys don't ever get to work with rigid much, because they're not exposed to it.

Barrie Cline: With what?

Paul Vance: Rigid ?

Louis Alvarez: Rigid conduit is the type of conduit that I was showing you today [00:59:30] that has the threads on it. It's a very thick wall, and you can use it ... It's got the galvanization on it, so it doesn't rust. Yeah, that's rigid conduit.

Setare Arashloo: You were saying that they mostly use it for outside, but sometimes [crosstalk 00:59:42].

Louis Alvarez: Sometimes indoors, when the code requires it.

Paul Vance: Like a fire alarm or something like that.

Louis Alvarez: Like fire alarm, or fire pumps, or sometimes the code it specified that certain areas have to have it, or sometimes a customer may specify that they want it in their contract, and they'll pay for it. [01:00:00] Yeah.

Barrie Cline: Thank you so much. I was wondering one last thing, if there was anything else that you would want to add, knowing that this is a bit of a time capsule or a snapshot of your work, and your work in Local 3?

Louis Alvarez: A story?

Barrie Cline: Anything else you might want to add, or that you'd like to close with?

Louis Alvarez: All right, if this is a time capsule, and maybe somewhere down the road, 50 years from now, somebody will be [01:00:30] listening to it, I'm going to get a little political right now. We are, under this current administration, with this president who I will name as president number 45, because I won't even refer to him by name. If you want to guess who it is, just look up to see who the 45th president was, or the president that followed Barack Obama. How he won was really upsetting for everybody. [01:01:00] The platform that he ran on was very upsetting for everybody. One of the things that I'm petrified about is, like I mentioned before, Davis Bacon, the new supreme court judge that he's going to pick who's going to be conservative, and Right to Work laws.

We're very afraid that because Congress is all Republican, as well, and they all [01:01:30] normally vote anti-union than pro-union on a lot of their legislations, as proven from state to state. We're very afraid that he's going to pass legislation or he'll sign off on legislation that is going to be detrimental to unions and the labor movement throughout the country. Hopefully that doesn't happen, and hopefully [01:02:00] in two years we'll get to overturn Congress, and put some Democrats back in there, and hopefully in four years, if he doesn't get impeached before that because he's so crooked, hopefully in four years we'll knock him out of that spot as well. Yeah.

Barrie Cline: Thank you.

Louis Alvarez: Yeah. Thank you.

